

# The Imaginations of Humanitarian Assistance

## *A Machete to Counter the Crazy Forest of Varying Trajectories*

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The United Nations cited the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan as the largest humanitarian crisis in living memory. The environmental catastrophe effected twenty million people and highlighted the complicated relationship between nature and society. The lives of extremely vulnerable groups such as subsistence farmers and unskilled labourers were severely disrupted by this catastrophe, forcing national and international observers to confront the uneven distribution of harm based on social factors in the wake of environmental disaster. In this visual essay, I explore the slow raging violence of floodwaters, which I witnessed as a humanitarian worker, and narrate a point of departure from social interventions after environmental collapse. The accompanying counter narratives draw the viewer's attention to the politics of representation. They reveal the dominant discourses of domination of the Third World subaltern as enacted by humanitarian agencies. By juxtaposing photos and text, I invite the viewer to engage in a generative encounter that takes note of the tensions between disrupted communities and systems of international assistance.

I draw inspiration from Spivak's concerns about representation. Spivak argues that "speaking for," as political representation, and "speaking about," as portrayal representation, suppresses the actual "voice" of communities (275-276). I suggest that by allowing spaces for counter-narratives, the photographer (in this case, myself as the humanitarian aid worker) and the photographed (communities undergoing flooding) are simultaneously present in these visual landscapes. This allows the possibility of voice even where and when words are not actually spoken. The (counter) narratives emerging from these visuals allow the photographer and the photographed to participate, "not only in the act of photography, but also in

the political space that the photograph elicits" (Azoulay 60). Additionally these visuals collectively form a "non-deterministic encounter between human beings not circumscribed by the photograph" (Azoulay 223). Therefore I reinstate photography as an open and generative encounter in which others (those outside the transaction) may also participate as interested political spectators. While the spectator is transfixed within his/her subjective position (Von Wright 413), Arendt suggests that it is possible for the spectator to take into account the perspectives of others (in this case "others" refers to disrupted Pakistani communities). Arendt labels this act of solidarity as developing an "enlarged

mentality" and defines the action of thinking with an enlarged mentality as training "one's imagination to go visiting" (Arendt 43).

Escobar argues that aid workers are positioned within the dominant development discourse and their agendas are consistent with singular notions of modernity and progress (6-12). The humanitarian encounter is essentially framed within a particular dichotomizing paradigm defined by relationships of difference (Kapoor 42). While these asymmetries may be intentional and political, humanitarian providers often model interventions in ways that may also inadvertently reproduce power relations. Gardner and Lewis argue that "discourses of development are produced by those in power and often result (even if unintentionally) in reproducing power relations between areas of the world and between people" (153). Therefore lives disrupted by natural disasters are never defined in their absolute condition but are always in relation to those who have power over them (Fassin 4).

In this visual testimony, I reclassify the aid worker as a troubled body suspended in a space of epistemological plurality, diversity, and difference. Aid workers are confident in their abilities to redress social disrepair via the technologies of social interventions. As

made apparent in the following pages, humanitarian technologies are not always consistent with visions of social reconstitution determined by disrupted communities. Such an awareness and recognition challenges the very notion of social interventionism. Therefore I provoke the following pressing question: how does the humanitarian

aid worker, destabilized by his own positionality and self-reflexive awareness, reconcile with re-building in a world of difference?

*I captured these visual landscapes during fieldwork with an international humanitarian organization in the months between December 2010 and March*

*2011. The photographs are set in the numerous villages of Thatta District, Sindh, Pakistan. In this district alone, the flooding disrupted an estimated 87,403 lives.*



**VIOLENCE OF WATER**

#### *Description*

Haider Ali shows the level of flood water in his village by pointing at the water line on his mud and brick house. Standing waters languished for a few days to several months—slowly destroying belongings, homes, lives, and livelihoods.

#### *Counter-narrative*

Climate change is rarely a spectacular display. Yet its effects rupture communities, particularly those who are already rooted within relations of inequity. Through this image, I challenge the viewer to rethink environmental disasters as slow violence, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous,

but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2). Therefore, the challenge in such a rethinking is primarily representational: “how to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence” (Nixon 2).

I ask the following questions: What forms of stories and images can adequately represent this elusive yet persistent violence? How can these representations draw the attention of decision makers toward gradual but certain environmental collapse?

Das’s ethnographic investigations of violence in post-partition India in 1947 and Sikh massacres in 1984 reveal that communities experience

violence within the rituals of mundane life. She notes that violence is also dismantled within the terrain of daily life. Das asserts that after any form of social disruption, life is reclaimed and recovered “not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary” (7). I argue that it is important for activists, practitioners, and policy makers to recognize the everyday as a venue of profound knowledge and insight. Communities perform extraordinary acts of everyday social reclamation to negotiate overwhelming experiences of lived violence. These micro-actions must also be captured in representations of gradual environmental collapse.



## THE DE-POLITIZATION OF HUMANITARIAN AID PRACTICE

### *Description*

A brick kiln dominating the skyline of a village community submerged in water.

### *Counter-narrative*

In rural Pakistan, the looming brick kiln is a space for bonded labour, generational servitude, and systemic oppression. During the flood response, humanitarian actors did not challenge structural determinants of oppression such as the brick kiln. Humanitarian agencies distributed food rations to communities and enrolled them in cash for work schemes that had little impact on their long-term rehabilitation and offered limited connection with their life worlds.

The insufficient imagination of disaster recovery is connected to the deliberate de-politicization of the humanitarian space by humanitarian actors. The discourse of neutrality is rooted within the Red Cross movement which maintains that all humanitarian actors must remain independent of any political agenda to allow aid agencies unencumbered access to victims of war and natural disasters. Mouffe and Ferguson argue that by promoting a depoliticized universalism and purposely omitting political narratives, relations of power and interests are concealed and remain politically unchallenged. Humanitarian actors' attempts to "separate out the political" from humanitarian action are therefore inherently interested (Kleinfeld 174). The insufficient agenda of neutrality prevents humanitarian actors from

embracing their roles as political actors. Thus, social interventions are reduced to risk-averse, calibrated executions of North-South resource transfers.

The photograph deviates from the usual way disaster landscapes are captured. Chouliaraki asserts that photographs often dislocate the context by concentrating on the immediate suffering of communities, creating emergency situations that emerge out of the immediate. Aid organizations claim the right to sweep in and abruptly sweep out of disaster zones by creating narratives that depict situations as needing rapid and life-saving intervention. By de-historicizing and de-contextualizing promotional imagery, aid organizations exploit aspects of the human condition while legitimizing their own interventionist agendas.





## EDUCATION FOR ALL / EDUCATION FOR NONE

### *Description*

A government-built and managed primary school damaged by flood waters.

### *Counter-narrative*

This primary school is the only built concrete structure in the village, an architectural contrast from the surrounding mud landscapes. Outsiders to the community, such as aid workers or government officials, may regard this building as a symbol of salvation or a sign of encroaching civilized urbanity. Through this image, I aim to highlight the colonization of rural landscapes by technocratic solutions.

As discussed by King (377-391), educational priorities in most developing nations, including Pakistan, are shaped

by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) agenda. These have culminated in Pakistan's leading education planning document titled the "National Plan of Action on Education for All Goals 2001-2015." This document aims to achieve universal primary education by 2010 for males, and 2015 for females. The strategy is simplistic at best: expand and invest in primary education. However investment in primary education is often limited to investments in physical infrastructure. Organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF evaluate success and progress by counting the number of students enrolled.

This means that issues such as low teaching quality, disconnection between educational curriculum and rural realities, or the systematic exclusion of rural students from higher

education are scarcely highlighted. Similarly, statistical data does not adequately capture everyday student struggles around schooling (Brock-Utne). Contradictions between local realities and global aspirations are rendered particularly visible after large scale social disruptions reminding the viewer of the unfinished project of education in the developing world.



## THE DYSFUNCTIONS OF EMPIRE

### *Decription*

A sack of emergency food rations donated by the Canadian government resting in a distribution warehouse of an aid organization.

### *Counter-narrative*

I use this visual to signal the interdependencies that exist between donors, aid organizations, and affected communities. Aid giving is strongly tied to the preservation of borders and processes of nation building. By crafting aid as a gift, the donor constructs a national identity while simultaneously crafting a discourse about the other (Kapoor 78). Self-construction is integral to this practice of gift (aid) giving (78). National emblems, such as flags, imprinted on food packages,

pamphlets, and construction materials publicize the donor's benevolence and sovereignty to multiple audiences transforming these neutral items into political objects (87). The relationships of dominance expressed via aid giving are crucial for the continued preservation of the humanitarian actors involved.

Charitable donations from benevolent countries can be in the form of cash or kind. In-kind donations need to be navigated within the complex system of logistics as the items change hands, continents, countries, and organizations. Should food rations be bought from Canadian farmers and supplied to locations thousands of kilometres away via an elaborate system of logistics (meaning that a bag of wheat might end up costing 50-200 times more than its original price in disaster

zones, for example) or should they be purchased locally with the intention of revitalizing local economies? Polman terms aid that must be used to purchase products and services from donor countries as "tied aid" or "phantom aid" (197). She writes that up to 60% of all official aid from donor countries, including Canada, is such aid (197).

I use this image to provoke the viewer to reconsider the emerging discourse of human security, bio politics, and food insecurity. The image reveals to the viewer the manner in which the regulation and resolution of hunger is framed as a global priority for mitigating regional conflicts and preserving international security. Food aid is the place where the noble intentions of humanitarianism intersect with the perverse imaginations of Empire.

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